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ABSTRACT

One of a series of papers on critical issues in vocational-technical education, this paper develops the thesis that vocational evaluation, a specialized division of vocational rehabilitation, has accrued a body of skills and techniques which might prove valuable to vocational educators. The four primary techniques (psychological testing, work sampling, situational assessment, and job tryout) are presented along with a synopsis of their origins and history. The implicit assumption is that the ability to improve special needs programming will increase in proportion to our ability to assess the needs of students. (HD)

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TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING INTERESTS, ASPIRATIONS, AND POTENTIAL OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING INTERESTS, ASPIRATIONS, AND POTENTIAL OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

Vocational education presently accepts students with a potential for meeting the goals of a given program. By assessing the student's potential with the tools of vocational evaluation, vocational education may acquire an improved ability to develop programs to fit individual needs.

In October, 1961, pursuant to instructions from President John F. Kennedy, the Panel of Consultants on Vocational Education was convened. They were instructed to review, evaluate, and report on existing National Vocational Education Acts. The final report of the Panel, entitled Education for a Changing World of Work, offered numerous suggestions for improving the Vocational Education System of the United States. Many of the suggestions offered in the report were used in structuring Public Law 88-210, Vocational Education Act of 1963. One of the pressing problems cited in the report was the severe lack of nondirective guidance, occupational information, and relevant programming for youth with special needs. In commenting on the lack of special needs programs in vocational education the Panel said that "there is overwhelming evidence that the problems which make up the complex are old, traditional problems. . . . On the whole, vocational education has been largely for selected students" (p. 131). Obviously they were calling for a change in established procedures of selecting vocational education students.

If the Panel's report had simply enumerated the faults of the existing vocational education program it could have been classified as "critical of the educational system" and filed with numerous other reports of like tenor. But the report did not stop with criticism. It offered specific recommendations for courses of action which would solve, or at least ameliorate, each of the

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problems identified.

The panel made nine recommendations which, if followed, would increase the level of quality of services provided to special needs students. Each of the recommendations merits the serious consideration of every professional educator, but the third item is particularly important to the present development. The Panel, in specifying assistance to be provided to special needs students, states:

> Such assistance should not be confused with the regular program of vocational education. . . . Specifically, vocational programs for youth with special needs should recognize that. . . careful selection and grouping should be made on the basis of aptitude, mental capacity, limitations, and needs: these students should not be enrolled in the various classes of the regular vocational program. (p. 132)

This guideline, along with eight other equally explicit specifications, provides a clear picture of the Vocational Special Needs Program the Panel envisioned.

One result of the increased emphasis on special needs programming was the formation of the National Association of Vocational Special Needs Personnel (NAVESNP). At the 1974 American Vocational Association (AVA) Convention in New Orleans, NAVESNP organized as the Special Needs Section of AVA's New and Related Services Division. At the 1975 AVA Convention in Anaheim this section (of four hundred plus members and one year's experience) took a different position. This position appears to support a philosophy of vocational education programming which is in direct opposition to the guidelines of the President's Panel on Vocational Education. The position, as reported in the February, 1976, issue of the American Vocational Journal,

said:

> In several resolutions passed, the Association took [this position]: To support requirements that states and territories adopt procedures ensuring that special needs students, to the maximum extent appropriate, be enrolled in vocational education with regular students. (p. 97)

This quotation from an unsigned source constitutes a meager basis for determining the philosophy of NAVESNP, but if the source is correct, the implications to existing special needs philosophy are highly significant.

In light of the discussion presented thus far it seems clear that there exists, within the community of vocational educators, at least two widely differing views on how best to approach the problem of special needs programming. In consideration of this divergence of thought it seems prudent to offer assurance that it is not an aim of this paper to argue the comparative virtues of any program, or philosophy, or technique. The single objective of this paper is to submit that a body of knowledge exists which might be used by creative vocational educators to help solve one of the problems which presently exists in implementing programs of special needs education. That problem is embodied in the question: "How can the needs of this student be assessed; does a system exist to assist me?"

Specific elements of numerous viable special needs programs are listed in the most recent Committee Print (Implementation, 1973). Basically, the subject report shows that three elements are common to all workable systems. First, the system must have the capability of assessing students' vocational abilities, interests, aspirations, and potential. Next, it must be capable of prescribing the course of action which has the greatest likelihood of allowing individual students to achieve their optimal vocational potential. Finally, it must be flexible enough to provide

assistance and services to everyone who has need of them. Interestingly, a system exists which has aims that are congruent with the above requirements. The system, vocational evaluation, is an important element of the field of vocational rehabilitation.

Vocational evaluation does not possess a magic wand which will provide instant fulfillment of the requirements which have been listed. It does, however, present four reasonably well-defined approaches to human needs assessment which may have potential for success as tools of the vocational educator. The four techniques are: psychological testing, work sampling, situational assessment, and job tryout.

Psychological testing has long been a tool of educators, guidance counselors, and psychologists, and the logical conclusion which might be drawn is that vocational evaluation has nothing new on the subject to offer vocational educators. If the conclusion was based strictly on mechanics of administration and test score interpretation, most vocational evaluators would agree. The difference appears when the test scores are interpreted and discussed with the individual examinee. The educator or school psychologist usually relies on a test score as a predictive measure of a student's probable success in a course. The evaluator, on the other hand, generally has *a priori* confirmation of students' present inabilities and is concerned with determining the cause of their inadequate performance.

Evaluators should be at least as concerned with a student's behavior while taking a test as they are with his final score. It is not at all unusual to find that a vocational evaluator has used several lines of a report to describe a client's behavior upon hearing a test result, and hardly any space at all to report the actual score.

Work Sampling, another technique of vocational evaluation, is best described as a simulated industrial operation, paralleling, in its essentials, the tasks required of a potential worker. Neff (1968) attributes the development of work sampling to the post-World War II period. The technique was devised to assess the work potential of individuals whose vocational characteristics could not be readily determined by normal industrial selection methods. Work sampling in its present form represents the efforts of job analysts to utilize the virtues of psychological test norming procedures and industrial job analysis techniques.

Over the years a vast array of work samples has evolved. Practitioners in vocational rehabilitation have developed an untold number of work samples in an effort to determine what jobs might be available to their clients. Industry, on the other hand, has been equally active in developing work samples. Their motivation has stemmed from a desire to determine which person, from those available, might best fit a particular job.

The situational assessment approach to vocational evaluation evolved, according to Neff, in the mid-1950's. The situational approach is similar to the work sample approach in that it attempts to simulate actual working conditions. One major difference, however, is that the situational approach uses a more general procedure than work-samples. The origin of situational assessment has traditionally been attributed to the dual contributions of the manpower assessment efforts of World War II and the Sheltered Workshop Movement of the post-war years. Since its conception, situational assessment has undergone a continual refinement process in the myriad workshops, adjustment centers, and mental health facilities where it is practiced.

In terms of satisfactory outcomes, job tryout is probably the most effective procedure available. In its most basic form, job tryout consists of repeated attempts to find a job for a client by placing the client on a job and allowing concerned parties to determine if a satisfactory level of compatibility results. In actual practice, however, such a random approach is seldom attempted, for obvious reasons. Generally, job tryout for an employee is the result of efforts on the part of a placement expert and benevolent management to find a job which a handicapped person can perform. What the job tryout approach lacks in rigor is more than accounted for by its ability to reward evaluator conscientiousness and creativity with client job placement.

In summary, it seems important to reiterate the basic thesis of this paper. The thesis is that vocational evaluation, a specialized division of vocational rehabilitation, has accrued a body of skills and techniques which might prove valuable to vocational educators. The four primary technqiues of vocational evaluation were presented, along with a synopsis of their origins and history. As a final word, it seems almost obligatory to note that this presentation was motivated by no higher aspiration than that it might make some small contribution toward improving educators' ability to assess vocational interests, aspirations, and potential of students with special needs. The implicit assumption is that the ability to improve special needs programming will increase in proportion to our ability to assess the needs of students.

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